MARICOPA COUNTY

ANIMAL CARE & CONTROL

Animal Control
A Century In Review

By Ed Boks, Executive Director
Maricopa County Animal Care & Control

The best way to understand animal control in Maricopa County today is to look at it through the lens of history. Our animal control program developed, or rather, evolved over the last century into its current state.

During the first quarter of the 20th Century, Maricopa County communities were rural and sparsely populated. Dogs and cats were valued for what they contributed to this rural lifestyle. Dogs, for the most part, were working dogs earning their keep on a local ranch or farm, or they were used for hunting to help put dinner on the table. Some dogs, as well as cats, were used as mousers to help keep small rodents out of home and barn. All dogs were permitted to run at large.

By the third decade of the 20th Century, free roaming dogs resulted in a dog overpopulation problem, and with it came an increase in the incidence of rabies; a very real threat to public health. The seriousness of this problem is graphically depicted in a masterpiece of American literature entitled, "To Kill A Mockingbird". At one point in the novel, Atticus Finch, a small Southern town lawyer shoots a rabid dog in the middle of a neighborhood street as residents watched trembling from their windows, behind locked doors. The context of this account suggests that Atticus had been called upon to dispatch rabid dogs before. In fact, shooting rabid dogs had made Atticus something of a local hero. He had come to be respectfully referred to as "one shot Atticus" because of his ability to take out a rabid dog quickly and humanely.

As a result of this all too common scenario occurring all across America, state legislators began to establish county rabies and animal control programs. In Arizona, our charge is to ensure dogs are vaccinated against rabies and licensed. Cats were not included in this mandate because cats are not a proven vector for the rabies virus. In fact, Maricopa County's dog licensing program has effectively reduced the incidence of rabies in dogs to a level that naturally occurs in cats, that is, we made it very rare.

It is easy to forget the terror the very word "rabies" evoked in our communities. The fact that scenes like that depicted in "To Kill A Mockingbird" are a thing of the past is a tribute to animal control professionals across the United States. Like Atticus, we are true heroes! And we do it today without firing a shot! We do it in Maricopa County by implementing the most successful rabies vaccination and licensing program in the United States!

Because cats don't pose a significant rabies threat, no laws have been passed to regulate their impact on our communities. In fact, a silly and erroneous notion was promoted that cats are "free roaming animals" suggesting communities don't need to regulate cats. An exploding feral cat population is the consequence of this short sightedness and today feral cats have become a significant public health concern.

During the decades when Maricopa County was focused on developing its state of the art rabies control program, referred to as such in many veterinary textbooks, a significant change was occurring in the human/animal relationship.

As we fast forward to the 60's, many of us in the animal care and control field were among the first Americans to bring the family pet indoors. I remember discussing this societal shift with my father in 1960 or 61. I was about 10 years old. I had been allowed to "buy" my first dog with money I had saved from cutting the neighbor's lawn. I was the happiest kid on the planet.

My father had grown up in a rural Michigan community. He tried to explain to me that he too had a dog when he was a boy, and his dog lived in a doghouse in the backyard. The idea of having a dog in the house was as incomprehensible to him as keeping the dog outside was to me. "Dogs don't belong in the house," I was told. However, I persisted, and Skipper, a black lab mix, was finally allowed in the house, albeit, in the basement where I spent many a night comforting him through the anxiety caused by his separation from mother and siblings. As time passed, Skipper eventually took his place under the kitchen table during meal times, and at the foot of my bed at night. He became the delight of the entire family.

All across the United States similar scenes were taking place. As our communities continued to urbanize, dogs and cats found their way out of the barnyard workforce and into our hearts, our homes, and for some of us, into our beds. Pets were no longer staff; they had become part of the family. Unfortunately, our animal control program, like most animal control programs in the United States, did not keep pace with this societal change and we continued to implement catch and kill methodologies right up until the last decade of the 20th Century and some programs like the City of Mesa's catch and kill cat policy continue even now into the first decade of the 21st Century.

As a result of a dog population explosion and the related threat of rabies, cities and towns entered into a contract with Maricopa County in the 70's to "get these unlicensed dogs off the streets". Unfortunately, these contracts dealt only with this immediate tactical need and little thought was given to any long-range strategic solutions. In fact, no thought was given to what we were to do with these animals once we removed them from the streets. The old contracts, in effect for 22 years, actually misdirected AC&C' focus, not to mention revenue, away from state mandated humane programs to non-mandated catch and kill services. The new contracts, effective July 2001, will reinforce AC&C's new direction as well as restore the flow of revenue to shelter programs.

Our current "catch and kill" designed shelters were built in the early 70s to warehouse dogs until they could be "disposed of". Our two shelters are a reflection of the "catch and kill" mentality that guided our program for so many years. As cats became more and more of a problem, our "dog pounds" started to be used to house terrified cats as well. Maricopa County is not unique in this respect. Most animal control programs still use antiquated and poorly designed shelters. I just returned from Los Angeles County where they are using a shelter built in *1938* as their main shelter.

Although our program may have been slow in recognizing the greater value people were placing on their pets, AC&C did respond quicker than most. We developed the most successful municipal pet adoption program in the United States, adopting out more dogs and cats than any organization public or private in the State of Arizona. Our aggressive spay/neuter program, started in 1992, has resulted in nearly a 50% decrease in our communities' euthanasia rate. The creation of a municipal "no-kill" Pet Adoption Center helped increase our adoption rate by 23%. We are on the forefront of developing a feral cat management program to finally and effectively address the feral cat problems in our neighborhoods.

What is the future of animal control in Maricopa County? Interestingly, we recently reviewed the state statutes governing our program and we found as much emphasis on developing humane shelter programs as we found on developing rabies and animal control programs. The reason so many humane and animal welfare organizations sprang up in Maricopa County during the 20th Century is because we in animal control missed this equal emphasis. Animal welfare organizations rose up to fill a gap in our animal control program. Not that AC&C was not dedicated to providing humane programs, we were. But because of inadequate funding, the threat of rabies, and the misguided focus of our deficit based contracts with the cities and towns, we had become more adept at developing catch and kill methodologies than humane, non-lethal solutions.

We were forced to fight symptoms rather than causes. Dogs and cats running at large is a symptom of a dysfunctional community. The cause is irresponsible pet owners who allow their pets to run at large, intact, to breed indiscriminately. County and municipal governments contribute to this dysfunction by developing the most costly and ineffective response to the problem, i.e., chase and impound pets, warehouse pets, kill and dispose of pets.

What would happen if we in animal control shifted our focus? More importantly, what could happen if those who control the purse strings shared our vision? A study conducted in the State of Minnesota found that for every $1 invested in spay/neuter programs they saved over $19 in animal control costs over ten years. In the State of New Hampshire, a targeted spay/neuter program designed to assist its indigent citizens resulted in a 90% decrease in that State's euthanasia rate over ten years. All across the country a feral cat management program, called *Trap, Neuter, Return* (TNR), is having a dramatic impact on solving neighborhood feral cat problems.

The future of animal control is proactive, innovative programs as opposed to the reactive programs of the past that only exacerbate animal related problems. As animal care and control professionals we espouse and promote result-achieving programs that solve the problems associated with irresponsible pet ownership. These programs require appropriate funding from the County, cities and towns, but the long-term payoff will be well worth the short-term investment. If we are successful, perhaps in a decade or two, euthanizing a healthy, well-tempered animal will be as rare as shooting a rabid dog in downtown Phoenix is today.